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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how and why high school students in Papua New Guinea may resist education, particularly as these factors affect individual identity and academic success. The study was in response to concern over declining student achievement. In a coastal village and two schools in the provincial capital, informal interviews were conducted with elementary and high school students (grade 6 and 10 graduates), parents, teachers, administrators, and board members; structured group and individual interviews were conducted with 38 high school students at various achievement levels; high school students were observed within and outside school over 7 months; and a questionnaire was administered to 320 secondary school students. Results indicate that a critical mass of students who felt they would return to their villages on graduation preferred social experiences in town and school over academic success, and valued a village-based identity within the student culture. These students policed their peers for signs of Western-based identities and unacceptable levels of academic effort. This anti-academic culture posed dilemmas for higher-achieving students, many of whom curtailed their own academic efforts and hid their aspiration to a job in the "modern" economy. Contains 20 references. (MSE)

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DILEMMAS OF STUDENT IDENTITY AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS IN POST-COLONIAL PAPUA NEW GUINEA

ED 425 636

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Introduction

In this paper I am going to discuss how and why high school students in a developing country may resist educational processes intended to make them into modern citizens. I will sketch a cultural basis for student resistance, and in doing so, try to emphasize how the meanings students make in school affect their academic engagement - in both non-Western and Western settings. In particular I am going to describe high school students' dilemmas over identity and academic success, and how these struggles were negotiated within the student culture in Manus Province, Papua New Guinea (PNG). At the time of my study in 1994-95, due to rising educational credentialism and unemployment, and declining provincial academic achievement, both parents and students in Manus were questioning the value of educational investment. I am going to present evidence which shows that in Manus High Schools, a critical mass of students who felt they would likely return to their villages upon graduation, were privileging social experiences in town and school over academic success, and valorizing a village-based identity within the student culture. These students policed their peers for signs of Western-based identities, and unacceptable levels of academic effort. This anti-academic student culture posed dilemmas for higher-achieving students: Many of them curtailed their own academic efforts and hid their aspirations of a job in the "modern" economy in order not to be perceived as acting

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"extra," and to preserve their peer relations and friendships. Thus, a subtitle for this paper is "The social cost of acting extra."

This study had several purposes: First, to provide Papua New Guinean educators with a qualitative study on in-school processes which affect student achievement. Second, to explore whether peer involvement - well-known as a predictor of academic achievement in Western schools - had significance in a non-Western context. And third, to investigate, at the request of the Manus Provincial Education Department, factors in the student culture which might underlie an eight year decline in high school students' achievement.

Methods and Setting

This research was based on one year of mixed-methods ethnographic fieldwork conducted from October 1994 to September 1995 in Pere, the coastal fishing village where Margaret Mead and Reo Fortune first did fieldwork in 1928, and in two high schools in the provincial capital of Lorengau. The research consisted of: Informal interviews with elementary school and high school students, grade 6 and grade 10 graduates, parents of students, teachers, administrators and board members in both settings; structured individual and group interviews with 38 high school students of various achievement levels; in- and out of school observation of high school students (and one classroom in particular at each school) over a seven month period; and a student questionnaire administered to 320 seventh, ninth, and tenth grade students in August 1995.

Pere Village

Pere village is located on the southeast coast of Manus Island. As many of you might know, three generations of Pere Villagers have borne almost 70 years of anthropological scrutiny. This was a fascinating experience in itself, as Pere is a place where becoming "caretaker of anthropologists" is a viable career option. In addition, numerous people there freely offered their opinions about how anthropology ought to be conducted. These conversations usually began, "Well, Margaret always asked us about..."

Though the people of Pere and Manus have gone through periods of skepticism over the value of formal education, they embraced it after World War II when high schools were introduced, and they saw that it could lead to white collar employment and remittances to village residents (Carrier 1984; Carrier & Carrier 1989; Otto 1991). However, recent developments have led many parents in Pere and Manus to become discouraged about the likelihood of a return on their educational investment (I should mention that while in 1995 elementary school fees were only $20, high school fees for boarding students were $400). Since the mid-1980s, rising educational credentialism and unemployment in PNG and Lorengau have made cash employment more difficult to find (Gupta 1992; Manus Census 1990). In addition, partially due to a new "Education for All" policy which has attempted to bring more students through to grade 10, the performance of Manus students on the National Grade 10 School Certificate Examination has declined markedly since 1987 (National Department of Education 1995). The PNG secondary school system goes up to grade 10, after which students take this highly competitive exam; only about 25% can expect to go on to further training after that; most of the rest go back to their villages.

These trends have resulted in a rising number of grade 10 leavers who, unable to find work or further training, have returned to their villages. Accordingly, some parents in Pere said in 1995 that the road of education was "blocked." In response, they tried to minimize their reliance on cash, continued to make their living from subsistence economics, and made claims to an (invented) traditionality (Keesing and Tonkinson 1982; Linnekin 1990) so as to maintain some degree of worth in this situation where important resources have shifted away from them. Many adults said that village life was better than town life because they were "free" in the village, they were their own bosses, and they didn't have to work on "white man's time."

Since I will take up issues of identity in high school, before we get there, I want to point out that there is considerable evidence that the social basis for identities in Melanesia is changing. The "traditional" Melanesian self has been described as constitutive of inherited social relationships to a far greater degree than the Western self (Leenhardt 1979; White 1991). Anthropologists have commented on how the disappearance of initiation rituals, erosion of ceremonial exchange, and increased penetrations of religion, commodities, and media intended for individual consumption, have led individuals in Papua New Guinea to have a heightened responsibility for self-creation (Schwartz 1975; White 1991). Implicit in this construction of the self is a changing epistemology which lends greater authority to personal experience and freely-entered social relationships, including friendships (Gewertz and Errington 1996; Shaw 1996). The in-school friendships that I describe below are relatively new social forms in Melanesia. Historically extra-village friendships functioned as trade relationships and had well-defined expectations of reciprocity. These in-school friendships did different work. They provided affective support, companionship, and mediated identity dilemmas, and, accordingly, are an

important new part of self-creation in post-colonial Papua New Guinea.

In High School

High schools in contemporary Papua New Guinea are gateways to potential futures in the cash economy which entail assumptions about relationships and personal identity which may contrast with those of students' home worlds. Students from different cultural groups in Manus struggled with how high school success or failure would shape themselves and their futures. Most students in the high schools under study were aware of the difficulties in getting jobs or further training after high school. Many of them adapted to the situation by curtailing their academic effort, resisting school authorities, and pursuing pleasurable social experiences in and out of school. These students routinely cut classes, did not complete homework assignments - or copied from each other or the teacher, and ridiculed and disobeyed school authorities. A group of grade 10 students even beat a teacher whom they said had used excessive corporal punishment on them in May, 1995. Shaw (1996) attributed similar resistance in a Taiwanese high school partially to changing student epistemologies, in which students privileged the authority of their own subjective experience and challenged teachers as equals.

These students also privileged social activities over academic success. They frequently "escaped" from school to go to town where they bought food, cigarettes, betelnut, alcohol, or marijuana, "eyeshopped," listened to music, or watched television. They also pursued male/female relationships on campus, though these were vigorously prohibited by school authorities. Finally, they regularly consumed alcohol and marijuana in school. Interviewed students estimated that between 60-90% of all male boarding students at one of the high schools

in the study smoked marijuana at least once a week, and that a smaller percentage of girls smoked also.

These students justified their actions by telling each other that in the current employment climate, a grade ten certificate was not enough to get a job anyway, and that their "villages were there" for them to return to after they finished school. These students felt it was not worth it to have to subject themselves to the disciplinary regime of the school (Foucault 1979), and that they might as well "enjoy themselves" while they were in school.

Likely in an attempt to maintain worth in a context of powerlessness, these students valorized a village-based identity within the student culture. This identity was parallel to that mentioned above in Pere Village, had moral weight (See Shaw 1994), and became normalized within the student culture. Students regularly said that it was "better" to be from a village than town, they spoke NeoMelanesian or their indigenous languages on campus, rather than the mandated English. Moreover, they eschewed the school dress code, boasted of accomplishments in fishing and hunting, and celebrated egalitarianism and sharing. This valorized identity, and the privileging of pleasurable experiences over school success were the core meanings of an anti-academic peer culture in the high schools (See Willis 1977).

The Negotiation of Academic Engagement and Personhood in High School

This student culture was constructed and disseminated through the interaction of peers and friends in school. The most widely-dispersed meanings in the student culture were concerned with the implications for student identity of the social orientations associated with school success and failure. School success was construed as leading to a cash-paying position in

a system of hierarchical status positions - and was sometimes conflated with local constructions of white identity. School failure was seen as returning to the village with its dominant ideology of Melanesian egalitarianism. Indeed, the ongoing construction of the village-based identity within the student culture entailed the constant surveillance of peers and friends for signs of betrayal - acting like the "other." Students particularly teased, criticized, and ostracized classmates whom they perceived were acting "extra" - and were thereby breaching the central tenet of Melanesian egalitarianism. These students were contesting what they perceived to be nascent forms of hierarchy (Sykes 1995).

For example, students criticized their classmates for not sharing their homework (and thereby being "greedy"), dressing in fancy new clothes, wearing high socks, make-up, a belt, or tucking in their shirts (dressing like white people); using "expensive" English words, and having overt aspirations to work in a modern job in the cash sector - the most popular of which were working as a jet pilot for boys; and as an air hostess for girls. Importantly, many of these students DID have aspirations for modern occupations and lives in the cash economy, but they hid them from friends and peers, and only shared them with their blood relatives. Moreover, they seemed unaware that their poor academic efforts would adversely affect their chances for such employment.

Most importantly, many higher achieving students found that their peers and friends made judgements about how much academic effort they would tolerate. Student questionnaire data (N=320) revealed that 51% of males and 58% of females felt that it was "hard" to be a good student in their school. Of those who answered affirmatively, 73% of males and 74% of females mentioned negative influence from friends as the primary reason for their difficulty. As two

students explained,

> Because when you have many friends, you won't become a good student (Grade 10, female).

> Because there are many students in my school. Some of them are very bikhet (naughty, cheeky). If I try to control myself, they will tease me. They will say that I'm a girl. So I'll follow them (Grade 7, male).

One high achieving eighth grade student, the recipient of a prestigious Margaret Mead Scholarship at one of the schools, cited the difficulty of not wanting to disappoint his friends. When I asked him if it was hard to be a serious student at his school, he said,

> Because here, at Manus High School, it's hard to be, like, a good boy. You can try to be a good boy, but, when you are in the middle of other boys, and they are doing things, you'll forget about your good ways, and just follow them. Like, they'll swear, things like that, you know? Swear, and some boys, they smoke. You come, you see other boys smoking, and they say, "try smoking" (Student Interview 7/28/95).

This student later disclosed that he was beginning to smoke marijuana himself. Other students said they knew that marijuana hampered their performance in school, but couldn't stop smoking it with their friends. Many high achieving students admitted that they were curtailing their academic effort, misbehaving, or cutting class in order to gain popularity with their peers - especially those of the opposite sex.

Some high achieving students, however, adopted strategies in school to succeed within this anti-academic climate. Many of them studied off campus at a relatives house, withheld correct answers in class, did not share their marks with friends, and generally downplayed their academic success. These general findings and particular strategies are remarkably similar to those reported in other recent ethnographies of minority students attempts to cope with academic success in urban North American high schools (See Fordham 1996, and Goto 1997).

Nevertheless, the quote above illustrates the difficulties Manus students experience in trying to be "good." These students had many people to please: their parents, an auntie who may have blessing and cursing power over them, their teachers, and, in this last boy's case, the Margaret Mead Scholarship Committee. Most immediately, however, these students wanted to please their peers and friends in school. These peers and friends had different ideas about what "goods" (Taylor 1989) were worth pursuing in life. These were determined by their own perceptions of the opportunity structure after high school, and the corresponding ways in which they were resolving their identity dilemmas. Students' use of the words "expensive" and "greedy" in describing the behaviors of certain classmates is startling evidence of how they constructed the kinds of capital which their peers could use to bolster their status positions. Many students contested these nascent forms of hierarchy by valorizing a village-based identity within the student culture. These student-constructed goods were disseminated with powerful weight throughout the student culture via the new social forms of in-school peer relationships and friendships.

These research findings parallel those of ethnographers of urban American high schools, and suggest that high schools in these contexts must acknowledge the subjective processes by which students make meaning of their schooling experiences, and explicitly intervene. Expanded guidance/mentoring programs, and culturally relevant pedagogy can engender in students the critical and cultural awareness that can facilitate school success.

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